Draft Decision Notice and
Finding of No Significant Impact
for the
Richards-Raven Multiple-Use
and Equestrian Trail Project

USDA Forest Service
Sam Houston National Forest
National Forests and Grasslands in Texas
Montgomery County, State

Introduction
This notice documents my decision and a finding of no significant impact for the Richard Raven Multiple Use and Equestrian Trail Project. My staff prepared an environmental assessment to determine whether construction of a multi-use and equestrian trails may significantly affect the quality of the human environment and thereby require the preparation of an environmental impact statement. The environmental assessment documents the analysis of two alternatives to meet this need.

The project proposed to construct 35 miles of multi-use trail and equestrian trails as part of a looped system and one trailhead. These actions are proposed to be implemented on the Sam Houston National Forest of the National Forests and Grasslands in Texas.

The Sam Houston National Forest lies just 50 miles north of the Houston metropolitan area. The population of areas just south of and adjacent to the national forest is continuing to grow and expand, creating more demand for recreational opportunities there. In cooperation with local community organizations, in particular the Sam Houston Trail Coalition, we have identified a need to provide additional recreational trails on the west side of the Sam Houston National Forest. In particular, there is a need to expand nonmotorized recreational opportunities, especially equestrian opportunities, on the west side of the Sam Houston National Forest.

My Decision
Based upon my review of all alternatives, I have decided to implement alternative C (also referred to as the “selected alternative,” which will construct an equestrian (nonmotorized) trail only. This alternative was developed to respond to public concerns regarding noise and recreational conflicts that may result from use of the proposed multiple-use trail extension on the west side of FM 1791.

To meet the need for additional recreational opportunities on the west side of the Sam Houston National Forest, we will construct approximately 35 miles of equestrian trails in a looped trail system. In addition, we will construct one trailhead, approximately 2 acres in size, to provide the public parking areas to access the trails (see figures 1 and 2).
Figure 1. Proposed Richard-Raven Equestrian Trail – alternative C (north half)
Figure 2. Proposed Richards-Raven Trail (south half)
The trails will be constructed using Forest Service standard practices in compliance with forest plan standards and guidelines for nonmotorized trail construction. Design parameters will be based on Forest Service technical guidelines that provide for the survey, design, construction, maintenance, and assessment of National Forest System trails based on their designed use, designated trail class and management intent (Forest Service Handbook 2309.18). The trails will meet the following trail management objectives for equestrian trail - native surface, sustainable, trail class 3 (developed), nonmotorized, and multi-use. Trail construction methods are intended to minimize natural and cultural resource impacts (see “Design Features” below).

The selected alternative includes removing understory vegetation within a 6- to 8-foot-wide corridor through the national forest and constructing a 2- to 4-foot-wide, single-track, natural surface trail tread within the cleared corridor. A combination of machinery, such as a small trail-building dozer, mini-excavator, rotary drum mulcher, and hand tools, will be used to clear forest litter and understory vegetation and construct the trail tread. No trees will be removed for trail construction. The trail will cross several ephemeral streams (streams that are not running year-round) with arch culverts, raised trail treads or armored crossings using appropriate materials. Approximately 12 stream crossings will require either wooden or engineered bridges ranging in length from 12 to 80 feet (see figures 1 and 2). Bridge design and construction will be similar to new engineered bridges on the existing multi-use trail.

Construction of the trailhead will involve clearing understory vegetation and some large mid-story and overstory trees and spreading rock aggregate to create a hardened surface for the parking area. Trees will be removed from the proposed trailhead to improve access and maneuverability while also managing for aesthetics and shade. All dead trees on the site will be pushed over and pushed to the boundaries of the site as perimeter markers, burned on site, or hauled off site. The initial proposed action included two trailheads on the southern portion of the proposed equestrian trail; however, analysis determined that construction of these trailheads may impact red-cockaded woodpecker habitat. Therefore, these trailheads were dropped from the proposed action and alternative locations may be identified and reviewed in future planning efforts.

The trail construction will be funded through grants acquired by the Sam Houston Trail Coalition from the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department Recreational Trails Program. Full implementation of the proposal depends on receiving these competitive funds and, therefore, the project is likely to be implemented in multiple phases. Full project implementation is not guaranteed. If approved, project activities are anticipated to begin in spring/summer 2017. Future maintenance of the proposed trail will be conducted to Forest Service standards and funded and performed by the Sam Houston Trails Coalition.

Design Features
Survey for wildlife and heritage resources was conducted concurrent with the trail design work. This helped to ensure that the trail location was planned to avoid effects to red-cockaded woodpecker habitat and heritage resources. In addition, the trail location was designed to limit ephemeral and intermittent stream crossings. Wildlife and heritage survey of the proposed trailhead site will occur prior to construction.

The design features shown in table 1 are also included as part of alternative C to reduce effects to natural resources and ensure compliance with forest plan standards and guidelines.
### Table 1. Project design features for the selected alternative

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Resource</th>
<th>Design Features</th>
<th>Source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Endangered, threatened species or sensitive communities</td>
<td>Inventory, identify, protect, and manage habitat for proposed endangered, threatened, sensitive and exemplary plant communities.</td>
<td>Forest plan (FW-025)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Endangered, threatened species or sensitive communities</td>
<td>Red-cockaded woodpecker clusters may be closed to protect the habitat of this endangered species and to prevent harassment from vehicle noise. Trails will be located away from nesting clusters; however, if woodpeckers move into these areas, use may continue unless disturbance is verified. Signs may be placed around clusters if needed.</td>
<td>Forest plan, Appendix E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Endangered, threatened species or sensitive communities</td>
<td>Design the trail to avoid impacts to Blackland Prairies. Work with partners to implement gating/blocking of roads, signage, or educational activities to prevent off-trail motorized use into nearby Blackland Prairies (located just north of where the proposed trail crosses National Forest System Road 209A2).</td>
<td>Project specific design</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Endangered, threatened species or sensitive communities</td>
<td>No dragging or cutting by construction equipment is allowed within the MA 4 streamside zones and wetlands. No entry of construction equipment is allowed within these areas.</td>
<td>Project-specific design</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Endangered, threatened species or sensitive communities</td>
<td>Stream crossings by construction equipment, recreational livestock (equine), or OHVs will only be authorized at designated locations as shown on the project maps and will be clearly marked on the newly constructed trail in a way that is easily visible by all trail users.</td>
<td>Project-specific design</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soil and water quality</td>
<td>Where feasible, avoid crossing moist soils, seeps or sandy soils by adjusting the trail location. For moist soils or seeps encountered on side slopes, adjust the trail location upslope. Where necessary, use armoring trail construction techniques, geosynthetics, and/or improved trail tread construction techniques.</td>
<td>National Best Management Practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soil and water quality</td>
<td>Where feasible, adjust the trail location to avoid crossing any intermittent, ephemeral stream(s), minimize the number of crossings or do both. If the trail is located less than 50 feet from a pond, adjust the trail to 50 or more feet from the pond edge. Where a crossing is necessary, use armoring trail construction techniques, geosynthetics, or improved trail tread construction techniques.</td>
<td>National Best Management Practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soil and water quality</td>
<td>Design and construct roads and trails to minimize siltation and maintain them to provide surface water drainage away from streams and into vegetated buffer strips or other filtering systems.</td>
<td>Forest plan (FW-053)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soil and water quality</td>
<td>Install waterbars, rolling dips or sediment catch basins on all trail sections as appropriate to minimize erosion. If suitable sod material is not available, then reinforce waterbars with corduroy or similar stabilizing material. Minimum waterbar spacings are found under forestwide soil and water plan standards.</td>
<td>Forest plan (FW-159)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soil and water quality</td>
<td>Designate trails with no gradients exceeding 25 percent.</td>
<td>Forest plan (FW-160)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-native invasive plant species</td>
<td>Control of invasive species will follow the NNIPS EA and Management Plan for the National Forests and Grasslands in Texas (USDA Forest Service 2008)</td>
<td>NNIPS EA</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Prior to moving construction equipment into the project area, equipment must be cleaned to prevent and minimize the spread of invasive species to other locations within the project area that are currently free of infestations. Encourage through signing and public education that all recreational off-highway vehicles and livestock (equine) from private land into the newly constructed trail to be thoroughly cleaned. This includes power washing of wheels, spokes, mud flaps, and cleaning of hooves and any other areas that could contain or hold mud, debris, or seeds.

Native plants

All areas disturbed from construction activities must be revegetated according to the recommended seed mixture.

Heritage

Effects to three known heritage resources will be avoided or minimized through minor reroutes of the proposed alignment:
- Reroute the proposed trail near Tram-1 [INFRA 08130400375, 41MQ316] to minimize impacts to the berm.
- Reroute the proposed trail near Tram-2 (NFRA 08130400376, 41WA317) to completely avoid the berm.
- Reroute the proposed trail at a prehistoric lithic scatter site (INFRA 08130400377, 41MQ318) to the backslope of the landform to avoid the site.

Heritage

In the event that historic or prehistoric cultural resources are discovered during the construction or maintenance of trails, work within the immediate vicinity of the discovery will stop and the Heritage Resources staff will be notified. The cultural resource will be protected until consultation between national forest staff and the State Historic Preservation Office is completed and a treatment plan is developed and implemented.

Vegetation

Where possible, locate trail tread a minimum of 3 feet from trees 6 inches or greater in diameter in order to prevent root exposure.

Safety

Signs that provide navigational maps and Forest Service trail use regulations will be installed.

Reasons for My Decision

This alternative will meet the need to provide additional recreational trails on the west side of the Sam Houston National Forest. In particular, it meets the need to expand nonmotorized recreational opportunities, especially equestrian opportunities, on the west side of the Sam Houston National Forest. This alternative is responsive to the public comments which supported additional equestrian trail development. In addition, it responds to comments that expressed concern about the 3 miles of motorized trail that were included in the proposed action. The selected alternative will not designate any new motorized trails. It will address the issues raised by the public about recreational conflicts, particularly limiting access and opportunities for hunters, and noise impacts. As shown in the finding of no significant impact, this alternative is consistent with the forest plan and other relevant laws, regulations and policies.

Other Alternatives Considered

In addition to the selected alternative, I considered 2 other alternatives.
Alternative A - No Action

Under the no-action alternative, current management plans would continue to guide our management of the project area. There would be no additional multiple use or equestrian trails in the project area. The no-action alternative serves as a baseline to compare the effects of other alternatives and we analyze it to meet the requirements of the Forest Service Handbook, Section 1909.15, Chapter 10, 14.2. In addition, the no-action alternative responds to some public comments received. In particular, it addresses the issue of conflicts between hunters and trail users in this area. This alternative was not selected, because it does not meet the need to provide for additional recreational opportunities.

Alternative B - Proposed Action

This alternative was largely the same as alternative C, except that approximately 3 miles of trail would be designated for motorized use. This alternative was designed to meet the need to connect existing motorized use trails to motorized recreation area outside of national forest system lands. This alternative includes extending the existing multi-use trail 3 miles on the west side of FM (Farm-to-Market Road) 1791, starting at the existing northwest trailhead near the junction of FM 1791 and National Forest System Road 208 and terminating at National Forest System Road 209A7 near the entrance to a privately owned and operated campground with separate motorized trails for adults and children on a 700-acre tract called the “Outlaw Trax.” This new multi-use trail extension would be designated as open to off-highway vehicles (50 inches wide or less). The trails would meet the trail management objectives for an (1) Equestrian trail - native surface, sustainable, trail class 3 (developed), nonmotorized, and multi-use; and (2) Multi-use trail - native surface, sustainable, trail class 3 (developed), motorized, and multi-use.

This alternative was not selected because of concerns raised by commenters, including the Texas Department of Parks and Wildlife Department. Commenters were concerned that additional motorized trails would impact the experiences of other recreationists and result in recreational conflicts and noise impacts. In particular, the state was concerned about the impact of this trail on access and opportunities for hunters in this area. Except for 46 acres, the entire national forest is designated as a wildlife management area through a cooperative agreement between Texas Parks and Wildlife Department and the Forest Service. This means all but 46 acres of the national forest is open to hunting for those individuals who possess an annual public hunting permit. While the environmental assessment identified the potential for recreational conflicts and noise as minor effects, I have determined that it is critical to be responsive to the comments of our partner agency relative to this proposed project area.

The environmental assessment identified a need to connect existing multi-use motorized trails to motorized recreation areas off of national forest system lands. Alternative B was designed to meet this need via a multi-use trail connection, meanwhile the selected alternative would not meet this need. However, I have determined, based on stakeholder input, the demand for this connection opportunity does not outweigh the potential impacts to other recreationists considering that motorized recreational users currently have FSR 209/209A7 access to the private off-forest recreation area by hauling their off-road vehicles there.

Alternatives Considered but Eliminated from Detailed Study

Federal agencies are required to rigorously explore and objectively evaluate all reasonable alternative actions and to briefly discuss the reasons for eliminating any alternatives that were not developed in detail (40 CFR 1502.14). Public comments we received in response to the proposed action provide suggestions for alternative methods for achieving the purpose and need. Some of these alternatives are outside the scope of the need for the proposal, duplicative of the alternatives we considered in detail,
or are components that would cause unnecessary environmental harm. Therefore, we have considered a number of alternatives, but eliminated them from detailed study for the reasons summarized below.

**Develop a Trail Master Plan**

Commenters requested that, rather than developing new trails, we should first prepare a Trail Master Plan. There is no requirement for development of a Trail Master Plan. Management of trails on the Sam Houston National Forest is guided by the forest plan, which includes strategic goals for providing a range of recreational opportunities and opportunities for cooperation and partnership between the national forest and local communities (forest plan, page 43-43). For Management Area 2, the forest plan directs managers to develop new trails and roads “as necessary to provide access for recreation and other compatible multiple uses. New trails, trailheads, or parking facilities may be built where needed to improve recreation opportunities” (MA-2-11). The need for additional trail opportunities has been established in coordination with the local communities and partner organizations. Therefore, it is reasonable to proceed with this project at this time. A Trail Master Plan will not be developed at this time, as the forest plan provides sufficient guidance.

**Adding More Off-highway Vehicle Trails**

The need for multi-use (motorized) trails, as defined in the purpose and need, is limited to providing a connection from existing motorized trails to motorized recreational opportunities outside of National Forest System lands. The 3 miles of multi-use trail proposed would meet this need. The Sam Houston National Forest offers 85 miles of multiple-use trails designated and developed for hiking, biking, horses, and registered off-highway vehicles. At this time, an additional need for motorized trails has not been identified for this project.

**Add an Equestrian Campground or Watering Spots**

Providing an equestrian campground or watering spots are not included in this proposal and are outside of the scope. These could be included in a future project.

**Public Involvement and Scoping**

To respond to the need, we have been working with the Sam Houston Trails Coalition to develop trails to provide for multiple-use activities throughout the national forest. Most recently, our partners in the coalition have received funding from the State of Texas to develop additional trail opportunities in the northwestern portion of the Sam Houston National Forest—they are calling this the Richards-Raven trail system. Based on this collaborative work, we developed the proposed project.

We solicited public comments for the Richards-Raven Equestrian and Multi-Use Trail Project from June 30 to August 1, 2016. A legal notice initiating the 30-day comment period was posted in the *Conroe Courier* on June 30, 2016. The notices consisted of a description of our proposed action and request for public comments, and an internet link with additional project information. We also mailed a scoping letter containing similar information to a mailing list of potentially interested parties including local government officials, state agencies, tribal organizations and recreational groups. We consulted Federal, State, tribal, and local agencies as well as interested individuals during the development of this environmental assessment. We received 27 comments from interested individuals and organizations. Public scoping identified the following issues regarding effects of the proposed action, which were analyzed in detail in the environmental assessment.

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1 This 30-day comment period satisfies the requirements of 36 CFR 218.25.
2 Issues (cause-effect relationships) serve to highlight effects or unintended consequences of our proposed action. Identifying issues provides us with opportunities to clearly compare trade-offs for the responsible official and the public and reduce
Issue 1 – Recreational Conflicts
Several commenters expressed concern regarding the potential for conflicts between recreationists. Some commenters were concerned that the multi-use and equestrian trails would limit hunting opportunities in the project area. Other commenters were concerned that motorized use on the multiple-use trail would impact hunting opportunities and would result in conflicts with equestrian users. To limit these potential conflicts, we would work with partners to include signage and trail education to ensure riders are aware of the existing regulations.

The environmental assessment analyzed the effects of the proposed action and alternatives on recreational conflict. We found that recreational conflicts between motorized and non-motorized would be reduced with the selected alternative (when compared to the proposed action) and that noise impacts on equestrian or non-motorized trail users would be less.

Issue 2 – Noise Impacts
Commenters expressed concern that OHV use would create noise that may disturb other recreationists. To limit these potential conflicts, we would work with partners to include signage and trail education to ensure riders are aware of the existing regulations.

The environmental assessment analyzed the noise impacts of the proposed action and alternatives. We found that the selected alternative would not result in any additional noise impacts and current noise conditions would remain the same.

Finding of No Significant Impact
After considering the environmental effects described in the environmental assessment and finding of no significant impact, and specialist reports, I have determined that alternative C will not have significant effects on the quality of the human environment considering the context and intensity of impacts (40 CFR 1508.27). Thus, an environmental impact statement will not be prepared.

Findings Required by Other Laws and Regulations
This decision is consistent with the Land and Resource Management Plan for the National Forests and Grasslands in Texas (the forest plan). The project was designed in conformance with the plan’s Management Area 2 management direction for recreation and trails. The forest plan includes strategic goals for providing a range of recreational opportunities and opportunities for cooperation and partnership between the Sam Houston National Forest and local communities (forest plan, page 43-43). For Management Area 2, the forest plan directs managers to develop new trails and roads “as necessary to provide access for recreation and other compatible multiple uses. New trails, trailheads, or parking facilities may be built where needed to improve recreation opportunities” (MA-2-11).

An environmental assessment was prepared, which led me to a finding of no significant impact. I determined the actions in alternative C will not have a significant effect on the quality of the human environment, and an environmental impact statement will not be prepared.

Administrative Review Opportunities
This project is subject to the pre-decisional administrative review process (also known as objection process) pursuant to 36 CFR 218, subparts A and B.
Objections will only be accepted from those who have previously submitted specific written comments regarding the proposed project during scoping or other designated opportunity for public comment in accordance with §218.5(a). Issues raised in objections must be based on previously submitted, timely, specific written comments regarding the proposed project unless based on new information arising after the designated comment opportunities.

A written objection, including attachments, must be postmarked or received within 45 days after the date that notice of this draft decision is published in Conroe Courier. Electronic objections must be submitted in a format such as an email message, plain text (.txt), rich text format (.rtf), or Word (.doc, .docx) to: objections-southern-texas@fs.fed.us with Subject: Richard-Raven Trail Project. Objections may also be faxed to 936-639-8588 to the attention of “OBJECTION: Richard-Raven Trail Project,” sent by mail to the following address, or hand-delivered during normal business hours of 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., Monday through Friday, excluding holidays:

William E. Taylor, Jr. Forest Supervisor
ATTN: Objections
2221 North Raguet Street
Lufkin, TX 75904

At a minimum, an objection must include the following (36 CFR 218.8(d)):

1. The objector’s name and address, with a telephone number, if available;
2. A signature or other verification of authorship upon request (a scanned signature for email may be filed with the objection);
3. When multiple names are listed on an objection, identification of the lead objector (verification of the identity of the lead objector shall be provided upon request);
4. The name of the proposed project, the name and title of the Responsible Official, and the name(s) of the National Forest(s) and/or Ranger District(s) on which the proposed project will be implemented;
5. A description of those aspects of the proposed project addressed by the objection, including specific issues related to the proposed project if applicable, how the objector believes the environmental analysis or draft decision specifically violates law, regulation, or policy; suggested remedies that would resolve the objection; supporting reasons for the reviewing officer to consider; and
6. A statement that demonstrates connection between prior specific written comments on the particular proposed project or activity and the content of the objection.

Incorporation of documents by reference is permitted only as provided in §218.8(b). It is the objector’s responsibility to ensure timely filing of a written objection with the reviewing officer pursuant to §218.9. All objections are available for public inspection during and after the objection process.

**Implementation**

If no objections are filed within the 45-day time period, approval of the proposed project or activity documented in a decision notice may occur on, but not before, the fifth business day following the end of the objection filing period. If an objection is received, the responsible official may not sign a Decision Notice until the reviewing officer of the objection has responded in writing to all pending objections, and the responsible official has addressed any instructions included in the objection resolution.
Contact
For further information concerning the Richards-Raven Trail Project, contact Christine Handler at cahandler@fs.fed.us or 559-920-2188 during normal business hours.

Approved by:

[No Signature for Draft Decision] ___________________________ ___________________________
WARREN L. OJA Date
District Ranger
Sam Houston National Forest
National Forests and Grasslands of Texas

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